



PROJECT INDEPENDENCE PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Abode Services launched Project Independence in 2000 in response to statistics showing that nearly 50% of foster youth in Alameda County were becoming homeless shortly after emancipation. It was one of the first programs in the state and the nation to respond to the needs of this vulnerable population. In July 2010, Abode Services' Project Independence entered into a collaborative, Next Steps, with First Place for Youth, Beyond Emancipation, and Bay Area Youth Center. Next Steps is funded by Alameda County to provide all THP+ (Transitional Housing Program Plus) housing and services for the County. THP+ is funded through the State of California to serve emancipated and former foster youth state-wide in an effort to reduce this population's risk of becoming homeless and to support them in becoming independent adults.

Project Independence offers these young adults the chance to stabilize in a safe and healthy subsidized apartment for two years while making use of adult support and intensive services that allow them to work and/or attend school while increasing their self-esteem, mental health, and ability to live independent adult lives. Program services include one-on-one personalized case management from a trained professional who assures that participants receive the appropriate housing and services; psychological assessments and treatment; drug and alcohol counseling; primary health care; benefits acquisition; practical tenancy training; financial planning; access to job training and education, including support applying to college and for financial aid; parenting support and children's services.

Young adults enter Project Independence after completing an application and several interviews, including an evaluation from the Program Manager, to determine their readiness to enroll in the program. Once enrolled, they receive the following services:

Subsidized Housing - Having the stability of an affordable home is a prerequisite for youth achieving their goals for independence. Abode Services is one of three housing providers in Alameda County funded through the state's Transitional Housing Program Plus (THP +), which underwrites housing subsidies and supportive services for emancipated foster youth. We master lease rental units at scattered sites and sublease the units to Project Independence participants for two years. The "scattered site" model is successful because it integrates youth into the community, provides opportunities to develop independent living skills and removes the stigma of foster care. All participants pay one-third of their income towards rent, with a minimum of \$25 per month. As participants increase their income through employment they come to rely less on their subsidy and contribute more of their own funds towards rent. Abode Services pays the remaining rent from THP+ funds and from funding from the cities of Livermore, Fremont and Hayward, where most participants reside.

PI Youth Service Coordinators help these young adults move into their new apartments and to acquire essential household items, such as beds, furniture and kitchen items through a small fund through the County, and contributions and donations to the agency. They also provide one-on-one practical tenancy training to assist participants in maintaining their housing. The training typically includes topics such as creating a household budget, maintaining a healthy home, what gets people evicted from their housing, how to have a successful housing experience, and what their rights are if difficulties arise with their landlord. Project Independence's Housing Specialist serves as a liaison between the landlord and participant, and advocates for the participant's housing rights as well as reminds them of their tenant responsibilities necessary to retain their housing.

Case Management/Service Coordination

Case management and service coordination build the participants' capacity for independence. PI participants, particularly those new to the program, do not have the necessary skills to get their lives organized and structured. They need extensive guidance in almost every area of daily living from basic budgeting and getting the electricity turned on to finding a job and paying the rent on time. In Project Independence, this guidance and support is provided by professionally trained Youth Service Coordinators (YSC) who work individually with each young adult to assure they obtain the appropriate housing and services. The YSC works with each new participant to assess their housing and services needs and to develop a realistic Transitional Independent Living Plan (TILP). The TILP is a formal contract between the young adult and the Youth Service Coordinator that serves as a road map for meeting the participant's goals for housing, training or education, employment, mental health, financial solvency, and other self-sufficiency objectives. The YSC meets with the young adult weekly to monitor their progress and to provide practical and emotional support in meeting their personal goals. The positive connection the Youth Service Coordinators make with PI participants cannot be overstated. It is the foundation from which these young adults move out to explore education and job opportunities, mental health services and other programs that help them transition to independence.

PI Youth Service Coordinators link participants to an extensive network of community-based organizations to access services including, but not limited to, education, job training and employment; primary and mental health care; substance abuse recovery programs; transportation; child care; and child developmental assessments and treatment. Some of our partners include *Las Positas Community College* and *California State University/Hayward* (Extended Opportunity Programs); the *Alameda County Independent Living Skills Program* (post emancipation care including financial assistance for books, notification of deadlines for financial aid grants); *Tri-City Health Center* (wellness exams, immunizations and family planning), *Bay Area Youth Center* (mental health services); and *Kidango* (child developmental/treatment services). Youth Service Coordinators also ensure that each PI participant has their birth certificate, school transcripts and other important documentation, and that they have active Medi-Cal up to age 21.

Mental Health Support

As part of the Next Steps Collaborative, Abode Services has entered into an MOU with Bay Area Youth Center (BAYC) to provide comprehensive psychological evaluations and mental health counseling for PI participants as well as provide mental health training and case conferencing for PI Youth Service Coordinators. BAYC has an outstanding record of excellence in working with the transitional age youth population. They offer a continuum of care utilizing a holistic, team-centered approach to assist participants in attaining their goals and maximizing their potential. BAYC also has a reputation for reducing the stigma that youth associate with mental health services. BAYC mental

health clinicians provided mental health counseling for PI youth at the BAYC offices and in participants' homes.

Parenting Support

To support the young mothers and their children in Project Independence, all mothers in the program will be assessed for depression and post/partum depression during their initial psychological evaluations with Bay Area Youth Center. Those mothers needing treatment will have access to BAYC's mental health clinicians. Abode Services' Children's Program will administer the Ages and Stages Social Emotional Questionnaire (ASQ-SE) to all children in the program, ages 6 months to 60 months. Administered approximately every six months, the ASQ-SE assesses the child's social and emotional development and identifies any areas of concern. Mothers will receive referrals for any treatment that may be needed for their child. In addition, the Children's Program Services Coordinator will meet with the mother's Youth Service Coordinator for case conferencing to assist the YSC in interpreting the results of the ASQ-SE and to collaborate on how best to support the mother in meeting the identified needs of her child and gaining the skills she needs to become a more effective parent.

Practical support and knowledge about parenting and child development will be provided by the YSC as part of an on-going conversation and is based on maintaining a respectful and trusting relationship with the mother involved. All mothers receive *The Kit for New Parents* developed by Every Child Counts/First Five which contains a Birth to Three Growth Chart, leaflets for how to play with your child, guides for the child's social and emotional development, information about what to do if your child gets sick, a "Healthy Teething Begins at Birth" leaflet, and other parenting resources. The Children's Program Services Coordinator will review the contents of the kit individually with each mother to ensure that she understands the information.